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FM AMEMBASSY TUNIS  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 6292  
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TUNIS 000297

SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA/MAG (PATTERSON/HAYES); NEA/PPD FOR(DOUGLAS/  
AGNEW); ECA FOR EAC/A/E (IVES)

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/05/2019  
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [SCUL](#) [KPAO](#) [TS](#)  
SUBJECT: FULBRIGHT STUDENT PROGRAM IN TUNISIA UNDER REVIEW

REF: A. A. 09 SECSTATE 83181

[1](#)B. B. 09 TUNIS 905

[1](#)C. C. 09 TUNIS 909

[1](#)D. D. 09 TUNIS 918

Classified By: By Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)  
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[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY. On April 29, Embassy PAO and ECA Branch Chief Donna Ives met with Abderahman Boukricha, Director of International Cooperation for the Ministry of Higher Education, Scientific Research and Training (MOHE) to discuss the future of the program in Tunisia. After the abrupt denial of research permission for American Fulbright students in July 2008 (see reftels), the dossiers for this year were sent to the GOT in February with a deadline subsequently extended to May 20. Boukricha indicated that the MOHE would not likely respond in time. The Ambassador raised the deadline with FM Abdallah on May 7 and requested a reply as soon as possible before May 20. In the event that no response is forthcoming from the GOT by May 20, the Department should consider suspending the Fulbright student program in Tunisia. END SUMMARY.

LAST SUMMER  
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[1](#)2. (U) As per reftels, on July 29, 2008, the Tunisian MFA informed the Embassy via diplomatic note that all nine U.S. Fulbright student researchers for 2008-09 were not approved to carry out research in Tunisia. After a demarche by the Ambassador, the MFA partially reversed the decision via diplomatic note on August 14 and permitted four of the nine students to carry out their research on four topics: economic development in Tunisia, urban development, women and foreign investment, and working women and the family.

THIS YEAR - NO RESPONSE YET  
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[1](#)3. (U) Embassy PAO met with Director of International Cooperation Boukricha in October. At that meeting, the Director stated that the GOT would like to affiliate the students with Tunisian universities in order to facilitate their research. He agreed to meet with the PAO once the dossiers of the Fulbrighters were received for 2009-10 in order to discuss placements and speed up the process. The dossiers were forwarded in February to the MFA and the MOHE. The PAO followed up with a series of phone calls expressing the need for an earlier response than last year. The Director stated there was no need to meet to discuss the dossiers and they would forward them immediately for consideration by the universities. However, by the beginning of April, the MFA had not sent a response on the student researchers.

GOT POSITION ON FULBRIGHT  
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¶4. (U) The Embassy sent a diplomatic note in April with the ECA response deadline of May 20, 2009. On April 29, ECA Branch Chief for Academic Exchanges for North Africa and the Middle East, Donna Ives, PAO and CAO met with Boukricha to discuss the future of the Fulbright program in Tunisia. Boukricha stated that unless the MOHE makes an extreme exception to their process, they will not be able to respond by May 20. He noted that the U.S. students must be affiliated with an MA program at a Tunisian university. They would have their files considered by the university committees that meet in May, June and July. These committees would approve the "suitability" of the research topics and the affiliations of the U.S. students by the end of July or August. "Fantasy" research projects, such as poetry or medieval history, or projects "against State interests," would be unlikely to be approved. He also noted that affiliation with the American Institute of Maghrebi Studies Center in Tunis would no longer be acceptable. In regards to Tunisian students, the Director requested that all Tunisian candidates come through the MOHE; they did not want to participate in interviews or selection committees run by the Embassy. The U.S. Fulbright program timeline and regulations were conveyed by Ms. Ives. She noted that July or August was not acceptable for a response date from the GOT and that the Fulbright program was an open competition for the Tunisian students.

¶5. (C) The Ambassador raised the deadline with FM Abdallah on May 7 and requested a reply as soon as possible before May 20. The Minister took note of the request, remarking that this is the responsibility of the Minister of Higher

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Education.

COMMENT

¶6. (C) The MOHE request to affiliate U.S. Fulbright students with Tunisian universities is not unreasonable. However, after consulting several other diplomatic missions (British, Japanese and German), the PAO learned that other foreign students are not required to go through the MOHE committees and affiliating process. These missions also have an open competition process for Tunisian students outside of the MOHE.

¶7. (C) The Tunisian process and timeline do not fit the dates of the U.S. Fulbright program award announcement in late May and orientation in June. These conditions have been explained to GOT officials in Tunisia; and, we understand that the Department has spoken with other GOT representatives such as Oussama Romdhani, the director of the Tunisian External Communications Agency, and Tunisian Embassy officials regarding the student Fulbright program. If the GOT does not grant approval to the U.S. Fulbright student grantees by May 20, the Embassy recommends that ECA and NEA/MAG consider suspending the U.S./Tunisian student Fulbright program for 2009-10. If the program is suspended, we would also recommend continuing to work with the GOT to determine whether a mutually acceptable formula can be found to restore this important program.  
Godec